And After the Storm

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And After the Storm

by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

He should have taken a moment before leaping into that alley. Mistakes like that were always obvious in retrospect. Bruce had chastised him for it, once upon a time. ***You're too reckless, too willing to jump without looking. You're going to get yourself killed.*** *Ironic, and cruel that Jason could remember that clearly even after losing everything else.*

——Can be read as a standalone——

Notes

Me: I wanna write a quick little thing that's all
My brain, suddenly smoking a cigarette in the shadow of a half-cocked fedora: tough noogies dollface

I don't know where the noir came from, I really don't.

Title comes from "After the Storm" by Mumford and Sons: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/mumfordsons/afterthestorm.html

See the end of the work for more notes

There was no night quite like a night in Gotham. Jason might have grown up a piss-poor street kid, but he'd expanded his horizons since then, gone full globetrotter. He'd bedded down in desert dunes, the silvery sand still warm from the day's unblinking sun even as the wind howled and nipped at his nose. He'd bunked in tropical forests, balanced on a tree limb out of reach of the beasts that prowled down in the dark. Remote villages, bustling urban centers, he'd seen maybe not all there was to see, but enough. Enough to know there was no place like Gotham.

The city feels so alive is something you hear any place with a pulse over a million. Cram a million souls into anything, anywhere, and it'll feel alive. But Gotham felt different, less beating heart and throbbing veins, more the dangerous prickling of a parasite puppeteering its host. Gotham's veins were narrow, hardened, crooked things that buzzed and sloshed with battery acid. Its lungs bellowed gulping, hacking clouds of soot and exhaust into a low smog that smudged everything bleary, no matter how hard Wayne Energy tried to scrub the air clean. Its fingers jittered like an addict's—always reaching, always grasping, always on the take. It was a horrifying, lurching, undead beast of a city, and nothing was worse than its nights, deep and dark and full of horrors.

Jason loved them. He was a child of Gotham, raised in her clutching, barbwire-studded arms. Once, he had longed to flee her. Once, he had, escaping through the u-turn tunnel of his own death and inexplicable resurrection. He had seen what existed beyond her harbors, out in that wide open world, but there really was no place like home. So he had clawed his way back to her and carved out a bloody niche for himself in one of her dark and dangerous corners.

Nowhere made him feel half as alive as Gotham did, mostly because she did her rabid best to kill him with every breath he took, every alley he walked, every fist he swung. He loved her the way a titan loved a worthy opponent—with fear, with respect, with a possessive hunger. No one could best him but her. No one could rival her but him. And he took comfort from knowing that, no matter how Gotham slavered and frothed to take a bite out of him, even death had found him too much of a mouthful to swallow.

Sure, the nights were a little different now. He'd given up on killing, mostly. Actually, Jason had been clean for months, time stacking atop itself and lifting him away from vague, green-soaked memories of blood-splattered cement floors and leaking duffel bags. But he had

given it up because he wanted to, not because anyone had made him do it, which meant he could go back to killing, if he wanted to. If he chose to.

Not killing made the nights… complicated. Challenging. When it came to being Hood, challenging was alright. Low-level drug dealers weren't known for their keen intellect, and even the upper-level kingpins, well, Jason had faced worse as a skinny teenager in hotpants. But he never knew how the night would interact with the Pit.

The Pit had made everything better at first, everything about *him* better. Faster, stronger, sharper, smarter, scarier. He was a blade whet to surgical precision, one sharpened so keenly that it bit clean through before the pain even had time to appear. The Pit made Gotham better, too. When the green sloshed and howled in his chest, Gotham would howl in kind, and he felt less alone. Now the night howled, and the Pit strained to answer. He couldn't let it. Wouldn't let it. And so he balanced on knife's edge, clinging to his self-control, straining against the urge to free himself of the restraints that scraped at thinning composure.

Jason had almost completed his circuit, preparing to loop back to a nearby safe house in the next half hour, maybe grab some groceries on his way. He tried to keep his paths unpredictable to anyone who might be watching. Each night was a little different from the last—different starting points, different loops, different crosshatching paths across the city. He tried to never run the same night twice. He tried. But the bats were out in the city, which meant his paths were affected by theirs, brought into line by the subtle repulsion of their orbits.

Not that there was bad blood, currently; no more than usual, anyways. Jason still avoided Big-N-Broody whenever he could—he and Dick were both too much walking baggage for Jason to want to deal with voluntarily—and avoiding them meant staying away from the little demon, which was probably best for both of them. By all accounts, the pipsqueak had a sharp enough tongue to tempt Jason to break his no-kill streak, and Jason resented the idea of being goaded into losing control by an al Ghul. And he didn't know what to do with the girl. They only ever crossed paths in uniform, and her freaky faceless getup made her impossible to read.

So maybe Tim was the only one Jason kept up with, and wasn't that just a fun little twist, his replacement, the kid he'd tried to kill on multiple occasions, being the only one in the whole rotten family—Alfred excluded—that Jason could stand. Except Jason had found it

easier to avoid Tim, too, recently. He didn't do it deliberately like he did with the others. They hadn't gotten along deliberately either. The kid had been in a bad place, Jason hadn't kicked him while he was down, and that was all there was to it. But now Tim was back in the Manor, the prodigal son returned home and welcomed warmly into the bosom of the family. And Jason was…

Jason was a lot of things, and he didn't want to think about most of them. All of them. And it wasn't like he missed the little snot or anything. Tim and Jason, they weren't anything defined. Not brothers, no matter what Dickhead said, not friends—convenient allies, maybe, at the best of times.

So when Jason had found himself near the end of his route, peering over the edge of a building down into a five-to-one brawl in the alleyway below, he had nearly kept going. But he hadn't. Instead, Jason crouched at the edge and watched the lone figure duck and dodge and neatly bludgeon its opponents into submission.

It had been a relief to see the kid on his feet. There, Jason could admit it, if only to himself. Before that night, he had last seen Tim in a crumpled heap, facedown on the floor of his apartment, crushed by a dangerously high fever that, apparently, stemmed from the kid's lack of spleen. Jason would have been irritated by the spleen surprise, except it seemed no one else had known either. And then Tim had disappeared into the Manor, and Jason's only source of information was whatever oblique references Alfred decided to drop when they crossed paths.

Call it idle curiosity that had made Jason stick around, attention on the fight in the alley–not intervening, just watching, legs dangling over the side of the building. No one had noticed him. Even bats forgot to look up sometimes. The kid had looked alright. The suit and mask had hidden most of him, but Jason had no doubt Alfred had been fattening the runt up. Five to one weren't bad odds for a mask, and Red had been handling himself fine.

Then Jason had looked closer, and what he had seen, he hadn't liked. He'd cursed himself later for that curiosity, the one that had lured him to stay until he had spotted signs of trouble, and then the recklessness that had made him crash down on the knife-wielding thug that had started lurching forward in the kid's blind spot.

No more dead Robins. Not even red ones.

The night had gone to hell from there. Turned out the spleenless wonder had decided to patrol alone with a raging ear infection. Jason had hauled the idiot back to his safe house to save him from his own stupidity, with the plan to ransom him back to Alfred in exchange for some delivered Tupperware meals, but even that had gone sideways. The kid had fallen asleep before Jason could make the call, then had woken up disoriented, feverish, and crying.

Jason wasn't a monster. He knew what ear infections were like, how awful it felt to wake up and know nothing but pain in a part of the body you'd thought was too small to hurt that much. He'd had them a lot as a kid, too underfed to have much of an immune system, sleeping in parked cars or drafty, unheated apartments with his mom, and then later curled up in whatever defendable corner he could find on the street. The infections had plagued Jason even at the Manor, though by then he had swapped out his mom's heated vegetable oil drops for the best antibiotics money could buy. He remembered lying huddled in his bed, mattress feather soft, Bruce's hand in his hair while Jason cried and called for his dead mom. He remembered being eight, six, three, his mom's cool, slender fingertips coaxing the oil down to where the infection festered, her voice cracked and trembling but soothing as she sung him to sleep.

Jason hadn't thought about Catherine Todd in years. He'd set her aside as a teenager, wrapping her memory in tissue paper and tucking the box deep inside himself, where she wouldn't fade or rust. It had hurt to think about her for too long, even then, and then with everything that had happened with Sheila… Jason had thought he had left his mother behind him, the way he had left everything associated with Jason Todd, child of Gotham. But long after Tim had been sent back to his family, Catherine had lingered.

The Pit had given Jason so much, but it had taken more. It was difficult to say how much, to know whether the holes in his memory were moth-nibbled or galaxy-collapsing in scale. He had thought he had charted their edges, careful of where the rims might crumble and drag him into the void. But he hadn't realized he had forgotten the smell of her dollar-store shampoo until it had hit him like a blow to the back of the knees. Or the get-dressed song she had sung every morning, back in the glimmering stretches of days when she was sober and present, until he woke with the echoes in his ears.

He was missing more. Jason knew he was. With every intrusive thought came the uneasy knowledge that four more lingered, hidden behind the patchwork veil of his memory, or gone forever. And not

every memory that returned was “aloha breeze” and silly ditties.

A month later, Jason still felt haunted.

He had spotted Red Robin from afar a few times in the interim, a quick flash of red and a flapping black cape in the distance, usually trailing a hulking shadow that Jason quickly turned away to avoid. Tim hadn’t crashed his apartment since that night either, though Jason had heard through the Pennyworth hotline that he was still alternating time between the Manor and his own place. Jason thought that was stupid, but no one asked him. And it shouldn’t have mattered to Jason one way or the other—it *didn’t* matter to him—except…

It had been a month. A month of solo patrols, some brutal, some empty, all of them slogging. A month of the Pit lying low, dulled to a murmur, a tide retreating to reveal the wreckage hidden beneath the waters. Too many memories. Too much loss. He could remember his mom, but not all of her. He could remember the Manor, but not the full years he had lived inside its walls. And in the day he slept and dreamed, and in the night he fought alone, and in the in between there was nothing else. His head was filling with thoughts, whisper building atop whisper into a cacophony he didn’t know how to silence. He couldn’t listen to them. He didn’t want to hear what they had to say.

But tonight’s patrol was almost over. Soon it would end, and he would return to his empty safe house to spend the last scraps of night staring up at a blank ceiling and the thoughts would continue to amass.

There was a scream somewhere in the dark. Not necessarily a problem, except it was cut off, replaced by the harsh, guttural voice of a man. Of men. A problem.

He should have taken a moment before leaping into that alley. Mistakes like that were always obvious in retrospect. Bruce had chastised him for it, once upon a time. *You’re too reckless, too willing to jump without looking. You’re going to get yourself killed.* Ironic, and cruel that Jason could remember that clearly even after losing everything else.

There were men in the alley. Jason didn’t know how many. Just men, plural, and a crumpled woman with dirty hair the color of sand.

What do you think, Jaybird? Should momma go platinum? I used to be a blonde when I was little. Now look at it, all washed out and drab.

No, no, I like your hair, momma, don't change it. Something like that, he'd begged, because his mom had already been changing bit by bit, day by day, as she grew thinner and weaker and further away, even before the drugs, when it was Willis draining her dry instead of the powder. It had been his job to wash her sand-colored hair and brush it when she was too sick or too lost to do it herself.

He should have looked before jumping down into the alley. Should have seen more than the hair, the bony hand, the glass pipe. But he had enjoyed the crash of his boots on the asphalt, the impact of his full weight and the warning it bore. Not a little boy anymore. Not weak. Not helpless. Beware beware beware.

The men—the dealers—turned their attention from the woman to him. The Pit met them with a howl.

He held himself by the slenderest of lines, a frayed thread easily plucked and snapped to keep the baying beast in his chest under control. There were more bodies than he had accounted for, a shifting storm of dangerous men on all sides in this place where *he* was supposed to be the hunter, *he* was supposed to be the one who conquered, him alone without the Pit and the strength it gave him. But now he was fighting it and them, two foes attacking together.

He almost lost. He *wanted* to lose. It would have been so much easier to let go, to let his vision go green and his memory go black and to come to later, alone, with no evidence of what must have happened except the carnage at his feet.

It was a near thing, nearer than he would admit. Jason Todd had faded back into the green, lost amid the blinding glow, the harsh beat of anger behind his ribs, and the wail of the dead in his ears.

He had nearly killed them. He would have killed them, had raised his fist to turn *assault* into *murder*, damn the consequences and damn this city and damn Bruce for letting it be this way—

But the screaming was outside his head, a thin, wavering shriek from the woman who had lifted her head, staring at him with unblinking, black-blown eyes as if *he* were the monster instead.

His mom had taught him to pick up his feet in the rain. They had walked in the park after a storm, her clearheaded for once, Gotham's skies scrubbed a lighter shade of gray than usual, and she had stopped every few feet to pluck wriggling earthworms from the asphalt and place them atop earth beside the path. They were nothing. Just

worms. But their struggles mattered to her. She had taught them to matter to him, to be careful of his steps after the rain and to watch the ground for those in need of rescue.

They were lower than worms, these men. They destroyed lives. They destroyed people like his mother. But the woman on the ground with the sandy hair was still screaming, and she was screaming at *him*, not at them. The moans of the Pit could not compete.

Jason staggered back, gloves red, vision the green of nausea and upset. The men would be of no harm to anyone anymore, not even themselves. Some lived, he knew. Some, he wasn't sure. The woman lived. The woman lived and fear still leaked from her lips without breath or break.

He fled.

He fled from her, from the alley, from himself, the howling in his ears riding him into the night.

At last, the Pit receded fully, not beaten back but retiring, a beast returning to its den to rest, and let him rejoin himself. Jason was in another alley, one littered not with men but with common refuse and the skittering shadows of rats. He smelled blood, sharp and metallic, and thought it came from the dampness of his gloves and clothes until he tried to take a step, his first since fully inhabiting his body again.

It hurt. Pain like a bite in his shoulder. He wiped a glove clear on his pant leg then reached back. New blood, bright and crimson, stained the leather. He didn't remember guns, but he thought he recalled something of a blade's gleam. A stab wound, most likely, unstaunched and flowing, though how much he didn't know.

Awareness, sluggish and muted, filtered back in. With soul slotted back into body, his body reoriented itself in the city. He was on the edge of his territory now, his nearest safe house blocks and blocks away. He didn't want to go back. He didn't want to face that silent space. He didn't want to stand at the sink and wash the blood from his gloves and wonder what memory would hit him next as he watched the swirling water turn pink. He didn't want to think about patrol and the faces that blurred but never seemed to change.

That was the problem. It never seemed to change. Months he'd spent trying to change this city, but it was Gotham, and it never changed, not for the better. He threw blood after blood, trying to wash the streets clean, to baptize its people into a life without murder and rape

and addiction, and nothing ever changed.

Jason Todd was many things, but foremost he was a survivor, and when warnings pulsed in the meaty hollow behind his ribs, he listened. They were pulsing now, their signals tied on strings to the growing pain in his shoulder, the static in his head, and the way the emptiness in his chest seemed to crumble and spread, a charybdis unfurling.

Jason licked dry lips and tried to consider what to do next. He didn't want to go to his safe house, the idea repellent and strobing with a danger he couldn't understand or ignore right now.

He wanted to go home. No, he wanted to *have* a home. He wanted his mom. He wanted—

The flare of light overhead made him start, the pain crackling through his shoulder in sync with the warning rumble of thunder. The air felt thick with the threat of rain and heavy with the smell of ozone. The stormfront had crept up on him, dark clouds stealthy despite their bulk, and now loomed ready to devour.

He was no predator now, no mighty hunter, no fearless beast. Instead, Jason cringed back from the sky, past and present grappling for dominance as the smell buried him alive. His shoulder gave another sharp protest.

He needed to retreat. He needed to hide, to burrow down away from the storm in the air and the violence in his chest and tend to his wounds in relative safety, except the warnings were still strong as ever. The safe house was not a safe place to be, not for him, not tonight. But he had nowhere else to go. No shelter in the storm, not for him. The Manor's doors were closed to him, his mother long rotted away, both childhoods buried with no chance of resurrection. He could have attempted the in-between, those hard, purposely forgotten days of squatting in abandoned buildings and sleeping upright with a shattered bottle in hand. But the thought of picking his way through unfamiliar places already filled with other huddled shapes made the Pit twitch in its sleep.

Instead, Jason withdrew to his last resort, a place he knew only by virtue of arming himself for eventualities that forked like bent tines. It was in the Narrows, its street no darker or fouler than any other in that crooked little neighborhood. Anonymity was the byword by design, so the few figures he passed kept their heads down and gaze

averted, happy to hurry on before trouble could brew.

The building looked no different than it had on his last recon pass, a hunk of brick, its once-solid edges now brittle with age and mediocre repair. There were some signs of life on its facade—a wilting plant in a shaded window, the squat box of a rusting a/c unit, a curtain with weak yellow light filtering through the weave—but as a whole, it was no different than its weary, sagging neighbors. Jason's destination waited six floors up. His shoulder protested in advance of the climb, but the growl of thunder at his back drove him onward.

Maybe it would be empty. He hoped, and yet even as he hoped, his stomach twisted at the thought. Emptiness here would be better than emptiness at his safe house, but that was like a rabid bat being safer than a rabid dog. Danger was danger.

Empty or occupied, he had expected traps, but he found nothing. Or, nothing that he could see at a glance. By the time Jason's fingers scrabbled at the window and jimmied it up, his teeth were chattering and the hair on the back of his neck had risen to attention. He considered falling. Decided six floors was risky. Pulled himself in.

The apartment was dark, still. Jason's stomach gave a final twist, then settled, resigned. That was fine. He didn't want to explain himself to anyone anyways. He'd find a way to patch himself up, ride out the storm as best he could, then leave. No one would need to know he had been here at all. Just a ghost passing through without leaving a mark.

He stalled out in what he assumed was the living room. He couldn't be sure. There was a beanbag chair, a square IKEA end table, and little else. The room smelled of stale, unlived air. Was this the wrong place, then? Had he come for nothing?

The blackout curtain over the window didn't quite reach the edges. Lightning flashed bright between the fabric and the sill. His shoulder ached, but the numbness was spreading. He felt like a clockwork toy on its final turn. Maybe he could just stand here until he wound down.

"Jason?"

Jason turned his head. His replacement stood in a doorway to the right. The room behind him was dark. He held a toothbrush and his feet were bare.

"Jason?" Tim said again, but he didn't move closer. "What…" His mouth moved, testing words that remained unvoiced before settling

on, “Why are you here?”

He couldn’t even think of an excuse.

“I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

Tim took a breath. Let it out. His forehead creased as he worked through some internal calculation Jason couldn’t and wouldn’t try to follow.

“Could you take off your helmet, please?”

Jason stared, uncomprehending.

“Please,” Tim repeated. He still held his toothbrush out to one side, poised to throw or to stab or buy himself time with the sliver of plastic, the only defense within reach.

Good. Good, he shouldn’t trust Jason not to hurt him. Jason hurt people. He had hurt *Tim* in the past. If Tim was going to be a stupid little bird with no alarms on the window or guns in his waistband, he could at least recognize that Jason was a danger.

Jason reached up and fumbled with the latch on his helmet, not bothering to grimace as the glove’s fingertips left a streak of wet under his chin. The helmet thudded against the floor and rolled. Jason didn’t move as Tim studied him again. It was harder to see him without the night vision built into his helmet, but it was easier to breathe without the unyielding metal enclosing his head and the green tinting his world.

Without turning away, Tim reached behind himself, fumbled at the wall just inside the room at his back, and flipped on the light.

“How much of that is yours?” The question was asked with deliberate evenness. Jason stared, then at last connected the query with its target. He looked down at himself, at the floor and the window behind him smeared with blood.

“Some.”

It was the wrong answer, one guaranteed to ruffle a bird’s feathers despite being the truth, but Tim only nodded once, forehead crease deepening.

“Are you here for help?”

Was he? It was Jason's turn to flounder for what to say. Why was he here? Outside, there was a loud crack of thunder, and Jason couldn't fully hide his flinch.

Tim's shoulders lowered slightly, as if Jason had given him an answer after all. He stepped back into the lit room, not turning away from Jason but making space for him on the bathroom tiled floor.

"In here."

The bathroom was bigger than he had braced for, fully prepared to buck away from a claustrophobic little closet. It still wasn't large, a typical cramped Gotham space, but enough for him to brush past Tim without touching and to stand in the square of empty floor space bracketed by the toilet and the shower/tub combo.

"Sit," Tim urged, voice still pitched low and gentle. A victim voice, or a danger voice, Jason wasn't sure which. "You look like you're about to fall over."

Did he? There was a mirror to his left. Jason caught a glimpse in passing of a grave-pale face, lips so thin and pressed they disappeared, but looked away quickly before he could see any more.

He sat on the closed toilet lid. His clothes were stiff. His limbs felt heavy.

Tim stayed where he was, only just out of reach but with the easy escape of the door at his shoulder. He crouched, opened the cabinet beneath the vanity, and pulled out a red first-aid kit, then a bin of supplies that he turned over and dumped on the floor before kicking the empty bin toward Jason.

"Weapons in there," Tim instructed. Jason looked back silently. "My apartment, my rules." Tim's voice fluctuated only a little, the barest quiver, and he returned Jason's stare.

That was fair, Jason decided, or would have, if his brain had been able to snag its freefall on any one conscious thought. Besides, either he was in danger here or he wasn't, and it didn't much matter to him at the moment. He unclipped his holsters and placed the guns in the bin. Hidden blades and projectiles followed, some dropped in, others lowered down, with pauses to let the world stop spinning with each change in posture.

When Jason had finished, Tim waited another few heartbeats, then

stepped forward and briskly whisked the bin away, out the door, and into the dark living room. Jason sat dully and made no move to stop him. He hadn't needed his weapons in the alley, after all.

"Do you want me to call…" Tim didn't finish the question, cut off by whatever twitch Jason's face had made. "Okay." Then again, to himself, "Okay."

Jason was staring at his gloves. There was blood in the stitching. He flexed his fingers but couldn't feel them move.

"I'm going to touch you," Tim declared. "I need to get your clothes off and see where you're bleeding. Don't stab me or anything."

"I wouldn't," Jason rasped, with a certainty that surprised even himself, a sudden, fierce vow to Tim, to himself, to the Pit curled inside him. Then, "I won't," because the revision was truer, firmer ground for them both. He *had*, but not this time.

Tim grunted, then moved closer until he stood between Jason and the light before inching into the narrow gap between the toilet and the tub. Nitrile gloved fingers curled around the edges of Jason's jacket, easing it off, slowing further as the slashed material caught on the wound.

"Knife?" Tim asked.

Jason mumbled something close to "Pro'ly" and Tim made a disapproving grunt that was too similar to Bruce's.

Tim's hand paused, pulling away at the sudden flinch. "Sorry." And then, "I'm going to cut off your shirt. Faster."

It was just a t-shirt, one of five in a plastic pack. Jason wouldn't miss it. He held still as scissors bit into the hem, carving upward until the fabric fell away. The remaining piece was dabbed with water from the tub faucet and carefully peeled away.

"It's kinda deep, but not too bad," Tim assured him. Careful fingertips probed the edges, then retreated. "Anything else?"

Jason considered the question, tried to feel his way through his own senses, then retreated from the static buzzing through him. "Dunno." He swiped his tongue across dry lips. "Don't think so."

A thoughtful hum from Tim. Jason was subjected to a quick but

thorough check, Tim's reticence replaced by intense focus. He really was a scrawny little twig of a kid, but he felt different in this space. Maybe because it was his instead of Jason's. In other circumstances, Jason would have looked around with interest, nosed through every room, cupboard, drawer, and pantry. Know thine enemy and all, except Tim wasn't his enemy and hadn't been for some time. Now, all Jason could do was rest his forehead against the cool tile wall and stare blankly at the roll of paper towels balanced on the rail.

Behind him, Tim had already set about disinfecting and numbing the shoulder. He missed the pain a little. At least it was something different. Then again, being able to sink down into himself and disappear completely didn't sound like a bad idea. But then Tim cleared his throat.

"So, uh, what happened?"

Oh. That's right. Tim was a talker.

Jason closed his eyes.

"I'm just saying, if this is crime family business or something, I should probably—"

"It… Just some drug dealers. In an alley." He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to see them behind his eyelids, or the woman, or any of it. He wanted that yawning emptiness that kept growing in his stomach, or anything else, but not those memories.

Tim made a general noise of sympathy, an awkward thing caught between a cluck and a hum. "Not your best night."

No. No, it wasn't.

"This would be, uh, kind of hard to reach by yourself?" Tim hazarded, the obvious statement tipping upward into a question as he continued to stitch the wound.

So obvious that Jason didn't need to answer, but he felt like he owed the kid. "Was too far from my safe house. The storm…"

As if to punctuate his point, another muffled crash of thunder sounded outside. Tim had to pause to keep from jabbing his shoulder in the wrong spot.

"Not a fan?"

“You dig yourself out of your own grave in a thunderstorm and tell me how you like it,” Jason snarled.

Tim had rested one hand flat on Jason’s back next to the wound, as if measuring it with the span of his palm. Jason kept his forehead pressed against the tile wall so he wouldn’t lean into the warmth. His biting reply added some heat, briefly. But then Tim recoiled and bent back to his work, touching Jason as little as possible.

So cold.

He doesn’t know. It wasn’t words so much as a feeling, a hiss like a snake belly over dry grass. The muscles in Jason’s back tightened.

“Hey, loosen up,” Tim chided, attention on his stitches. “I’m almost done.”

He doesn’t know. No idea what it’s like to be you. Spoiled little bird.

Jason’s hands fisted in his lap. He would have sworn the Pit was dormant, sated and content by the night’s violence.

Shut up.

Should teach him a lesson.

Shut ***up.***

Tim was gone.

And then he was back.

“Hey.”

Jason opened his eyes into slits. Tim was squatting next to him, a plastic cup in hand.

“Here.” He bumped the side of the cup against Jason’s knuckles. “Drink this.”
Jason didn’t move.

“It’s knock-off V8,” Tim explained apologetically. “Not good, but it helps. You look like you need it.”

Jason took the cup. His hands were trembling. He hadn’t noticed until his fingers curled around the plastic. He drank.

Tim stayed where he was, elbows resting loosely on angled knees. He had that look on his face again, like Jason was a crossword puzzle with missing squares. He was… a lot closer than Jason was comfortable with. Much closer than he had been to anyone in longer than he could remember, at least without throwing a punch or swinging a knife.

Tim's bottom lip was bleeding.

"Did I do that?" Jason rasped.

Tim blinked, then licked his lip clean. The skin underneath was chewed ragged. "No."

God, he looked way too young.

Young and stupid.

He must have missed something. The cup was gone from his hand, and Tim was standing now, a cautious hand on Jason's elbow. The shower was running.

"Get cleaned up." It was somewhere between a suggestion and an order, soft enough not to cause offense, hard enough to be impossible to ignore. "Keep your clothes on or whatever. I'll bring in a fresh set."

The shower was warm, bordering on hot. It might have felt nice, if Jason hadn't remembered the storm outside. He couldn't let the spray touch his face, twisting away so it fell down the rest of him instead. He stayed only long enough to let the water run clean into the drain.

Getting out of the shower was unpleasant. Even with the iron-fortified not-V8, Jason had lost blood, and the comedown was rocky. He felt scraped empty, hollow and whistling except for the hiss in that space behind his jaw every time Tim came within strangling distance.

But Tim was there, peeling back that plastic wrap covering his gauze, handing him a stack of soft fabric, stepping even closer when Jason wavered and had to catch himself on the towel rail.

"Come on. I've got it all fixed up."

Soft.

Jason gritted his teeth. He was better than this. He had *beaten* the Pit. He was in control over his own actions, not some toxic sludge.

Not what your gloves say.

Tim was leading him out of the bathroom, half supporting, half guiding, seeming not at all concerned by the way Jason shuffled along without fighting.

“Kid,” Jason began, voice still rough and patchy.

“No, just look,” Tim insisted. They passed through the empty living room with the blood splatter still dark on the floor. The blackout curtain over the window was gone. Jason flinched and turned his face away from the rain-spattered glass, but Tim led him on, down a narrow, carpeted hall that emptied out into a nearly closet-sized room.

The room was dark. The missing blackout curtain now hung here, over the window. No, not just hung. There were strips of duct tape tacked to each edge. The nightlight on the wall was the only light source, illuminating a full-sized mattress squatting on the floor, blankets and sheets askew.

“Here.” Tim tugged Jason over to the mattress and gestured for him to sit. “You can stay here. And look.”

He let go, hurrying to the leaning IKEA end table identical to the one in the living room to push a button on the plastic phone speaker. The tinny shush of white noise filled the room.

“Kid,” Jason tried again.

“It’s safe,” Tim insisted.

No. I’m not.

“There are blackout curtains and a noise machine, so the storm won’t bother you. I won’t bother you either. You’re already dry and patched up, so there’s no point going out and getting your stitches soaked. There’ll be coffee ready in the morning.” Tim hesitated, clearly grasping for more points in his favor as he shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“Why?” Jason’s chest hurt. His chest hurt and his throat felt raw and he couldn’t tell if he wanted to run or throw a punch or rebury himself until all the weariness leached out of his marrow. “Why is this so important to you.”

And oh shit, there was the kid, the one Jason remembered from

before. Before Bruce died, before the world fell apart, before he ended up with a broken little bird with a thousand-yard-stare bunking on his couch every time the night got too bleak. This was that first kid, the one who squared up in front of every danger like a primary color-clad terrier, like he could just *talk* his way to victory.

It had been a long time since Jason had seen Tim's jaw squared off like that. He'd forgotten how irritating it was.

One good swing and you can break that delicate little jaw.

"Because I owe you. And because it's the right thing to do." Tim gave a little huff. "And because I want to, okay?"

"This is a bad idea," Jason warned even as he lowered himself on aching knees to sit on the edge of the mattress."

"You came to me, remember?" Tim shot back, not unkindly.

He shouldn't have. This was a bad idea, a dangerous idea. His nails picked at the callous on his thumb, scraping and scraping at the skin. It was better than driving them into Tim's too-knowing eyes. He saw too much, and Jason didn't want to be seen.

"Jay?"

The name felt like the sharp shock of a static jolt. Jason's head whipped up to stare at Tim, who was now squatting again, balanced on his toes, eyes level with Jason's. When had he done that?

"You helped me when you didn't have to." Tim's words were halting, so different from the free-flowing, anxious chatter of a moment ago. But the muscle in his jaw was still tense and his gaze was steady. "And you never asked questions, but you let me talk if I wanted to. So. I guess, I'm here if you want to talk about… anything."

Jason considered jumping out a window. The landing would shatter his shins, but he would be away from the need to *talk*.

Tim must have read the panic somewhere on Jason's face, because he lifted both hands and tiptoed backward, still in a squat. "I'm just saying."

Once he was far enough back to stand without looming over Jason, Tim rose and walked to the door. "Coffee in the morning," he reminded, "if you want it. I'll be out here if you need anything."

And then Jason was alone, just him and the weak glow of the dollar store nightlight. He stared at it, a comfort in an otherwise pitch-black room, until his eyes grew heavy and he slept.

When he woke, it was to a thundering in his chest and the ragged, retching gasps that scraped at his throat. Jason yanked at the collar of the t-shirt, trying to pull air from what felt like an airless box.

“Jason?”

Jason sprang backward, one arm extended defensively, and his back smacked against the cool plaster wall. Slowly, the shape of a boy coalesced in the shadows. Tim. His attention snagged on the weapon in Tim’s hand.

Tim’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Did you know you scream in your sleep?”

Jason rubbed at his own neck. No. He didn’t. But he wasn’t surprised. Slowly, he lowered his arm, and Tim mirrored the movement, retracting his bo.

The dream was already fading, just snatches left of images and feelings, with a sickening, awful fear tainting it all. He didn’t want to try to bring it back.

“There’s a water bottle to your left. On the floor.”

Jason considered, then uncurled aching limbs just enough to snag the bottle by the plastic lid and haul it close. He drank. The water soothed his throat but did nothing to settle the shaking. He clasped the bottle with both hands.

“I almost killed someone tonight.”

The words sounded stark in the quiet dark, like bleached bone on asphalt. Tim didn’t respond, just settled down into that same, waiting crouch.

“A lot of someones. Actually.” Jason took another drink. “There was a woman. Crack addict.”

His hands were clean. He had to keep looking at them to remind himself. There was no blood under his nails. Not tonight, anyways.

“Is she okay?” Tim asked. “The woman.”

“She was an addict,” Jason repeated. She would never be okay, not on that path. But that wasn’t the question. “I…”

Tears, hot and choking, welled. He hadn’t cried in… He didn’t know. Tears were for the weak. He wasn’t weak. He wasn’t *vulnerable.* He couldn’t afford to be.

But when he squeezed his eyes shut to hold back the tears and the dreams alike, he saw her again. Sandy hair. Blue eyes. Fear carved into her face. The fake seed pearl earrings he had given her for Mother’s Day when he was six.

The truth of it choked him.

She would be so disappointed in you.

Everything he had done since coming back to Gotham was a waste. Worse than a waste. He had tried to make life better for people like his mom. But all he had done was become a new nightmare in a city of monsters.

“Do…” Tim began, then hesitated. The Pit hissed like a viper, coiling protectively around his shame, his guilt, his rage.

You’ve said too much, he’s seen too much, take his chattering tongue and flee before it’s too late.

His heart felt so heavy and brittle, like an old leather sack full to bursting. Jason ground the heel of his palm into his chest again and again, trying to rub away the pain, the Pit.

“Do you want a hug?” The words tumbled out in a rush.

A joke. A mockery. It had to be.

He hadn’t expected the little brat to be so cruel.

Kill him. Beat him. Strangle him. Make him pay.

There was no laughter. No wry followup. Just silence.

“Yes,” Jason choked out.

Yes. He wanted to be four, five, six, cuddling with his mom in a sheet tent in the living room, oblivious that they were using a candle for their “camp” because their power was out again. He wanted to be twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, awkward and unsure and *safe* with

Bruce's chest against his ear, Dick's arm slung across his shoulders, Alfred's hand on his back. He wanted to make contact with another human without bruises blossoming at his touch or blood springing from his fingertips.

There it was, finally, the sharp intake of breath.

***Mocking** you.*

The mattress shifted, dipping with the weight of a body settling beside his.

Hurt him. HURT HIM. Hurt him before he can hurt you.

The Pit had no voice. There was no voice but his own.

An arm tentatively settled across his back.

Jason gripped his knees and buried his face in his arms.

It wasn't what he remembered, being hugged. He had been such a scrawny kid, malnourished and stunted. His mom had been slender but she would wrap around him and hold him close like a treasure. Bruce, Bruce had been a giant. He had made Jason feel enveloped, safe, protected.

Tim was nothing. A scarecrow strung together with chicken wire and pluck. His gangly little arm could span the breadth of Jason's shoulders, hunched as they were, but only barely, and pressed uncomfortably against the new stitches. But his fingers gripped Jason's shoulder like they were both drowning and he was the one thing keeping them afloat. His head was warm and solid, a grounding weight against Jason's arm.

It was awkward, afterward. There was no magical fix for the two of them, two damaged heirs of a broken lineage. There was too much bad blood, too much history and too much lack of history. They had never shared a roof, a family, a confidence. They weren't brothers. Jason wasn't naive enough to even think them friends.

So they didn't make eye contact when Tim pulled away and Jason scrubbed his face with his shirt sleeve. They didn't talk about it. Jason didn't spill his heart or beg Tim's forgiveness for the past. Tim didn't give false promises or assurances of undying loyalty.

But the panicked, paranoid buzz in Jason's head had quieted, and his

heart had stilled. And when Tim shifted to rise and go back to his beanbag chair in the living room, Jason, his attention carefully fixed on the blankets he was straightening, huffed that the kid would give himself a bad back, so he might as well stay.

And that was awkward, too, two strangers clinging to opposite edges of a cheap mattress, saved from further mortification only by keeping outside of the halo of the weak nightlight on the wall beside them. But the night was deep and growing deeper, the storm was a memory lost beneath the hush of cheap plastic speakers, and Jason's head, for once, was silent.

End Notes

True story, that beginning was SUPPOSED TO BE the beginning of "Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Hood" until I figured out that needed to be Tim's POV. And then it was SUPPOSED TO BE a quick little thing where Jason let himself be vulnerable emotionally the same way Tim had physically. But here we are.

Also wow I am a wordy sonnufagun I apologize

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